



Successful Strategies for Promoting Self-Advocacy Among Students with LD:

The LEAD Group

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Students with learning disabilities (LD) often need to be taught self-determination skills to be better prepared for life after high school. This article describes the methods used by one school district to promote self-advocacy and self-awareness skills for students with LD. Through multicomponent group activities, students learned about their strengths and disabilities and how to advocate for their educational needs and rights. Advocacy skills were also applied to leadership roles, mentoring, and community education activities. Important features that contributed to the success of the program are described.

Self-determination has been increasingly recognized as a critical outcome for students with disabilities as they prepare to transition to the adult world (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998b). The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, has funded numerous projects to develop self-determination conceptual models, assessments, and interventions (Ward & Kohler, 1996). Research demon-

strates that self-determination is associated with greater quality of life (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998) and more positive adult outcomes (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, and Wehmeyer (1998a) conceptualized self-determination as follows:

a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior. An understanding of one's strengths

and limitations together with a belief in oneself as capable and effective are essential to self-determination. When acting on the basis of these skills and attitudes, individuals have greater ability to take control of their lives and assume the role of successful adults. (p. 2)

A recent review of research literature shows that self-advocacy skills and self-awareness are the subsets of self-determination most often taught to individuals with learning disabilities (LD; Algozzine, Browder, Karvonen, Test, & Wood, 2001). Techniques used to promote self-awareness in students with LD often include the use of interest inventories, learning style assessments, and experiential activities designed to allow students to “try out” different activities (e.g., careers), as well as gain knowledge about LD.

Self-advocacy instruction for high school students often focuses on knowledge about rights and responsibilities, effective communication and negotiation skills, identifying and requesting accommodations and modifications, and instruction on participating in and even directing one’s own Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting. Some programs help students generalize their self-advocacy skills and knowledge to other environments, such as college or the workplace.

The next level of self-advocacy for individuals with disabilities is learning to apply those skills to a larger, systemic level: ensuring that society honors the rights of *all* individuals with disabilities. Creating a society that is responsive to the needs and rights of individuals with disabilities requires that self-advocates develop leadership skills, as well as other self-advocacy skills (Field et al., 1998b).

Many resources exist that teachers can use to help students with disabilities develop self-advocacy skills. In a literature review on self-advocacy instruction, Merchant and Gajar (1997) determined that self-advocacy is most often taught through the use of

- role play (Durlack, Rose, & Bursuck, 1994);
- strategies such as I-PLAN (*I*nventory strengths and areas of improvement, *P*rovide information, *L*isten and respond, *A*sk questions, *N*ame your goals; Van Reusen, Deschler, & Schumaker, 1989); or
- direct instruction, including a description of the target behavior, demonstration, rehearsal, practice, feedback, and practice in a natural environment.

Numerous published curricula also include lessons that target self-advocacy skills:

- *Self-Directed IEP* (Martin, Marshall, Maxson, & Jerman, 1996);
- *Choicemaker Self-Determination Curriculum Series* (Martin & Marshall, 1995);
- *Next S.T.E.P.* (Halpern, Herr, Wolf, Doren, Johnson, & Lawson, 1997); *Steps to Self-Determination* (Field & Hoffman, 1996);

- *Take Charge for the Future* (Powers et al., 1996); and
- *Whose Future is it Anyway?* (Wehmeyer & Kelchner, 1995).

This article describes a program called Learning and Education About Disabilities (LEAD) implemented in one school district that uses a number of research-supported practices to successfully promote self-advocacy and other self-determination skills for students with LD. LEAD was selected as one of six exemplar sites as part of the Self-Determination Synthesis Project, a comprehensive research synthesis project funded by the Office of Special Education Programs, Department of Education. (More information about the exemplar sites and the entire project is available on the project Web site at <http://www.unc.edu/sdsp>)

LEAD

Background

LEAD began in 1996 in response to concerns expressed by high school students with LD. Students and parents had reported that some general education teachers were reluctant to provide accommodations and modifications. Some students were having difficulty coping with their disability, and a guidance counselor who worked with several students with LD noticed that they lacked the self-awareness and disability awareness necessary to effectively explain their needs to teachers. The guidance counselor formed a support group with the intent of helping students better understand their learning disabilities and more effectively advocate for their academic needs. Since its inception, the group has grown from 4 to include as many as 17 students each academic year. LEAD participants meet during a class period and receive course credit that counts toward graduation. The group is co-led by the guidance counselor and a special education teacher. While the majority of LEAD students are diagnosed with LD, students with attention deficit disorder and hearing impairments have also been members.

Philosophy and Content

The primary tenet of the LEAD group is that of student ownership. Students determined the group’s mission statement, which includes “increasing the level of understanding and awareness of the social, academic, and emotional aspects of learning disabilities. . . . We focus on not allowing disabilities to become liabilities.” The group includes four elected officers who meet weekly to determine the group’s upcoming activities. The group’s coleaders share the philosophy of student ownership of the educational process and believe in promoting leadership opportunities.

Ninth-grade group				
Monday No class	Tuesday Education day • The referral process	Wednesday Support day • Informal discussion led by counselor	Thursday Education day • Begin new unit: Evaluation and interpretation of testing	Friday Mentoring • Mentor pairs at other schools
Advanced group				
Monday Officers meet • Plan for next academic year • Plan mentoring activities	Tuesday Education day • Review video of previous presentation, evaluate performance • Discuss classroom accommodations that can prevent students from needing to go to the resource room	Wednesday Support day • Informal discussion led by counselor	Thursday Education day • Revise community presentation to include more about what LEAD membership entails	Friday Mentoring • Mentor pairs at other schools

Figure 1. Sample week of LEAD activities.

To accommodate the needs of a growing group with varied backgrounds, LEAD now consists of two separate groups: one for ninth graders and one for an advanced group. Both groups have a weekly schedule that includes two days devoted to educational activities, one day for mentoring, and a fourth day for a support group meeting (see Figure 1). All members of both groups participate in community presentations. There is some flexibility in the schedule in order to plan for community presentations and address unexpected issues that arise. Each of the main content areas of LEAD is described in the following sections.

SELF-AWARENESS AND DISABILITY KNOWLEDGE. The LEAD group discovered early that although students had developed an awareness of their feelings about having a learning disability, they did not know themselves educationally. Because self-awareness is a critical foundation for being able to advocate effectively for oneself, the co-leaders decided to focus on helping students first become more aware of themselves academically. In order to help students understand themselves better, students' cumulative folders, with IEPs, test results, and other data, became the class's textbook, for use in discussing academic strengths and weaknesses. A psychologist taught the students about intelligence and achievement testing and how to understand their own IQ test results. Students not only benefited from learning that they were highly intelligent, but they also learned how their learning strengths and

weaknesses were reflected in the IQ subtest scores. Students who had also taken personality inventories learned to interpret their information as a means of better understanding their strengths and areas in which they needed support. The unit on the evaluation and interpretation of test data (see sidebar, Sample LEAD Lesson Plan Outline), which spans six class sessions, has been extremely well received by LEAD students and their parents.

Equipped with knowledge about their strengths and needs, LEAD participants decide which additional topics they wish to cover; the co-leaders determine how best to deliver the information and promote the related skills. Using a combination of personal knowledge and published resources (e.g., Sousa, 2000), the co-leaders have created their own curriculum to include topics such as brain differences, the definition and diagnosis of different types of learning disabilities, accommodations and modifications, legal rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act legislation, facilitating IEP and 504 meetings, learning styles, multiple intelligences, and other similar topics. Adults with LD serve as guest speakers, providing students with information about how they have learned to navigate the adult world.

The disability-related knowledge and self-awareness that LEAD students develop is then used as a basis for their self-advocacy. By knowing what accommodations or modifications they require, students can brainstorm as a

group how to best approach specific teachers with a request for an accommodation. Group members often talk through an entire scenario or use role-playing to practice their self-advocacy skills. One of the group's coleaders often accompanies freshmen on their first visit with a teacher to discuss accommodations. If a request is not successful, the coleaders and group members will help the student develop other ideas for negotiating with the teacher. As students gain experience in negotiating with their teachers, the coleaders remove themselves from those conversations, and the group members serve as a sounding board for problematic requests. The special education teacher who coleads the group works individually with teachers to develop the supports necessary for students' accommodations; however, the students are responsible for negotiating accommodations that do not significantly increase teachers' responsibilities.

LEAD students further refine their communication skills using an exercise in which one of the group's coleaders plays the role of a "non-believer," often a skeptical teacher or community member who claims not to believe in LD or the need for accommodations. In this "devil's advocate" role, the coleaders offer objections, stereotypes, misinterpretations, and other challenges to the students as they develop counterpoints and enhance their ability to articulate their disability. For example, a statement about the students looking "normal, not handicapped" might prompt a response about students' specific learning problems and how they impact the quality of their academic work. The coleader might then make further objections based on the quality of students' responses that then require the students to explain themselves more effectively or add details that they omitted from their previous responses.

SUPPORT GROUP. Through support group meetings, LEAD students discuss the challenges they face in coping with their disabilities. The support group component of LEAD has many of the common characteristics of effective group therapy (Corey & Corey, 1997). Group members provide a level of empathy that they believe individuals without disabilities are incapable of providing. They help each other cope with feelings such as shame and anxiety and build the confidence they need to approach teachers about accommodations. Group members also challenge each other at times when individuals try to hide their disability or do not take opportunities to self-advocate. The group relies less on the coleaders as facilitators for support group discussions compared with educational activities.

COMMUNITY PRESENTATIONS. The LEAD group frequently makes presentations to parents, students, preservice special education teachers, and teachers in nearby school districts. The group has also presented at state and national learning disabilities conferences and to their

Sample LEAD Lesson Plan Outline: Evaluation and Interpretation of Test Data

Testing background

1. Reliability
2. Validity
3. Percentiles

WJ

1. Subtests
2. What do they measure?
3. How would it apply to school subjects?
4. What do the scores mean?

WISC-III/WAIS-R

1. Full scale score
2. Performance subtests
 - Discussion of each subtest
 - How do the performance subtests indicate strengths and weaknesses?
3. Verbal subtests
4. Discussion of each subtest
5. How do the verbal subtests indicate strengths and weaknesses?

Review of what testing means

1. How important are the tests?
2. Do the tests determine your success or failure?
3. How is eligibility determined?
4. Is it worth the time?
5. Appropriate accommodations based on test data (lead-in to next unit)

Note. WJ = Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery (1977); WISC-III = Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children—Third Edition (1991); WAIS-R = Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale—Revised (1981).

own high school faculty. The purpose of the presentations is to educate others about learning disabilities, but the scope of each presentation varies according to the audience. For example, group members can respond to questions from teachers about what teachers can do if they suspect a student has a learning disability, or how teachers can help their students become better self-advocates. The sidebar Sample Format of LEAD Group contains a sample format for a presentation to teachers.

Presentations to the business community include general information about young adults with LD and a panel discussion in which business leaders ask students about

issues such as disclosure and confidentiality. LEAD participants also ask business representatives about how they compensate for weaknesses and accentuate their strengths in the workplace.

One particularly dramatic element of most LEAD presentations is a poem written by one of the LEAD group students (see Figure 2). Audience members are given a handwritten copy the student's first draft of a poem, followed by a later version of that poem after accommodations (e.g., use of computer spelling and grammar check features) were provided. This exercise helps audience members understand how a student with LD views the

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world; the poem's author speaks about how he realizes his mistakes but is unable to collect them. Students typically spend a few minutes during LEAD class prior to each presentation determining the schedule and priorities for that presentation. Continuing the philosophy of student ownership, the group's coleaders do not participate in the planning session, nor do they participate in the presentation itself.

Community presentations also serve as teaching opportunities as each presentation is videotaped and reviewed in subsequent LEAD class meetings. Students have an opportunity to critique their performance by identifying the strengths of the presentation, brainstorming ways to more effectively communicate answers to unexpected or complex questions from the audience, and reflecting on things that they wished they had said. Even in those cases where students believe they have answered well, the group reviews segments of the videotape and discusses ways in which they might have made their point more effectively.

MENTORING. Beginning in LEAD's third year, students decided they wanted to help elementary and middle school students benefit from their own experiences in navigating the educational system. LEAD members worked with coleaders to develop ideas for building rapport with younger students and age-appropriate methods for delivering materials and messages. In the current mentoring approach, two LEAD members, a ninth grader and an upperclassman, are paired with small groups of students with LD in two elementary schools and one middle school.

While mentoring activities initially emphasized structured educational activities about disabilities, LEAD students discovered that a "big sibling" approach was a more effective way to informally educate younger students. Increased emphasis has been placed on building rapport and enhancing younger students' self-esteem. The LEAD mentors meet with younger students for an hour each week at the younger students' assigned schools for conversations about issues raised by the younger students. Mentors take opportunities to normalize the younger children's experiences and point out their strengths in the course of discussion. For example, if an elementary student says he is embarrassed about needing extra help in reading, the mentor might say that she also needed extra help when she was in elementary school, that she was still a "normal" person, and that she was glad she had received help because now she relied on those reading skills in high school. Middle school mentors start talking about the LEAD group in the second semester so that ninth graders can decide whether they want to join the group the next year.

Implementation Issues

Although the LEAD group has enjoyed strong administrative support from the beginning, a few barriers were encountered in the process of starting the LEAD group. The primary difficulty was student scheduling; numerous conflicts made it difficult to find time for the group to meet. Instead of being structured as a club or part-time seminar, the class was turned into a full-time elective course that students could choose as an alternative to other electives often chosen by students with LD.

Another roadblock encountered by LEAD early in the process was the disbelief among some general education teachers that learning disabilities even exist and that LEAD would be a beneficial class. As teachers have re-

Sample Format of LEAD Group Presentation to Teachers

- Introduce agenda
- Read LEAD mission statement
- Definition of learning disability
- Individual introductions: name, type of problem or deficit, and a specific area of strength or a skill
- Poem (see Figure 2): handout and discussion
- Example accommodations
- Question and answer session, with group president or leader acting as moderator

Original poem

Aloene loste wakling down the steert of this urben
jungele. Whatein fore the love of my life not whet
nowen too call me from behinded

It's not no colldnot sher if it day or night just
whored wher I an going Alon and lost walking in
the erbine jungle on to a road off inlitamet
An intlitament of sperit to become more than it is
nowe too grwe past the brondres that logec has in
slaved it in.

I her the bet of the stepe as my feet shelf me
along the street of the jungle 1, 2, 3 the Bat of the
hert as it is awankend with now relization of the
futer and the past.

What Ive incotend and hop to incotedr on joner
of lefe not wheat past it forst mark of triumph.

Poem with accommodations provided

Alone, lost walking down the streets of this urban
jungle

Waiting for the love of my life not yet known
To call me from behind.

It's hot, not cold, and not sure if it's day or night
Just worried where I am going alone and lost.
Walking in the urban jungle on a road to
enlightenment.

An enlightenment of the spirit
To become more than it is now.
To grow past the boundaries that logic has
enslaved it in.

I hear the beat of the steps as my feet shuffle me
along
The streets of the jungle.

One, two, three, the beat of the heart
As it is awakened with new realizations
Of the future and the past.
What I have encountered and hope to
encounter
on a journey of life not yet past its first marker of
triumph.

tired from the school, students from LEAD have met with the new teachers to help them understand the group's purpose. The emphasis placed on student responsibility for accommodations has also minimized the impact of accommodations on general education teachers' workload, dispelling one of the myths held by some teachers.

Effective Practices

LEAD students, parents, and teachers all agree that LEAD has helped students become effective advocates, both for themselves, as well as all individuals with LD. Some of the critical factors that have helped LEAD be successful follow:

- **INTRODUCING SELF-DETERMINATION COMPONENT SKILLS IN AN EFFECTIVE SEQUENCE.** LEAD students first need to understand their strengths, challenges, learning styles, and interests before explaining them to others. As students become more self-aware, self-advocacy skills such as communication and negotiation are introduced. The additional skills of communicating to large groups and mentoring younger students build upon the LEAD students' earlier self-awareness and self-advocacy skills.

- **MAINTAINING A PHILOSOPHY OF STUDENT OWNERSHIP, WITH AN APPROPRIATE BALANCE OF SUPPORT, GUIDANCE, AND INDEPENDENCE.** Student ownership of the LEAD group's tasks and objectives has been of primary importance since day one. The coleaders help students enhance their self-awareness and self-advocacy skills within the context of the students' interests. At the same time, younger students are not expected to immediately grasp the concepts and develop effective advocacy skills without some guidance and coaching. One of the group's coleaders described the process of transferring ownership to students in the following way:

For ninth graders, we hold both their hands while they're here. By the time they're in tenth grade we have released one [hand]. By the time they're in eleventh grade we're not holding them anymore. By the time they're in the twelfth grade we're patting them on the back and telling them, 'good luck'.

The LEAD group members have adopted a similar philosophy as they help students in nearby districts develop their own groups. LEAD students do not give the other students the "answers" about what accommodations they can ask for because they believe each student has to determine that for himself or herself.

- **EFFECTIVE MODELING OF SELF-ADVOCACY SKILLS.** Modeling functions in several different ways for LEAD. The group's coleaders, each of whom has a disability, are models for the LEAD students. Within the group, up-

Figure 2. Poem used to illustrate the impact of accommodations on a student's writing. Used with permission.

perclassmen with better-developed self-awareness, leadership, and self-advocacy skills serve as models for the underclassmen. All of the LEAD group members serve as models for the elementary and middle school students that they mentor, as well as for students with LD in their high school who do not participate in LEAD.

• **OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVING SELF-ADVOCACY SKILLS EMBEDDED IN ACTIVITIES OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM.** When invited to present to the National Learning Disability Association Conference in Washington DC, LEAD participants had to present their plan to the local Board of Education in order to receive approval for the trip. Graduating seniors who expressed interest in attending college visited campuses and talked with representatives from the Disability Services offices. The group's coleaders observed and videotaped these interactions in order to help the students improve their ability to assess the availability of necessary supports at the colleges they were considering. Creativity is required of the group's coleaders as they identify these teachable moments for a group that determines their own curriculum.

• **CREATING A SCHOOL CULTURE THAT SUPPORTS SELF-ADVOCACY.** School and district administrators have become increasingly supportive of LEAD as they have visited with the students during class and observed their presentations to community groups and teachers. The district superintendent became a strong advocate for the group after accompanying them to the conference in Washington DC; now he helps them form relationships with the local business community. The principal's support of the group led him to allow the students to make a presentation to the high school's entire faculty during an inservice day. The group's coleaders also work one-on-one with general education teachers to explore how to support students' self-advocacy and respond to students' requests for accommodations. The special education teacher who coleads the group also coteaches mainstream English classes. The coleader models methods that promote students' self-advocacy within the classroom, and the two teachers have also collaborated to develop instructional methods that benefit students with and without LD. For example, they simultaneously deliver instruction differently based on students' learning styles and allow all students in the class to choose which method they prefer.

Implications for Practitioners

The LEAD group has successfully improved self-awareness, self-advocacy, and leadership skills among high school students with LD and other disabilities. While developing their own skills, they have also had a significant impact on others:

What I've gotten out of LEAD, out of the kids . . . is that self-examination, that self-assessment, and it's forced me at 55 years old, I'm sitting down re-looking at my strengths and weaknesses through the eyes that they look at themselves with—through tough eyes. (School District Superintendent)

The students in LEAD have raised the community's consciousness about individuals with LD and helped younger students understand their own disabilities and how they can affect their educational experiences.

Implementing this innovative program has required ambition and creativity on the part of the students and coleaders, and support from administrators and parents. Students who participate in LEAD must have some degree of willingness to be open and acknowledge that they have a disability for the supportive and educational parts of the program to be effective. Even without all of these successful elements in place, certain parts of LEAD could apply to any program designed to enhance students' self-advocacy skills. Changes to the LEAD group structure and content could be modified depending on the students who participate. The LEAD group students expressed a definite bias against using prepared lesson plans and published curricula, but students at other schools may be more comfortable with the use of formal instructional materials. LEAD students have decided to write one participant's 504 Plan as a group; the same exercise could be used to help members develop their IEPs. Younger students who enter LEAD with less knowledge about learning disabilities could participate in a semester-long, intensive education component before integrating fully with the older students. The leadership structure of the LEAD group could also be adapted from a traditional four-officer structure to one based on the group's functions to allow students the opportunity to assume leadership roles within the group.

Although it may be challenging for educators to allow students to have control over the curriculum, student-directed work on self-awareness, leadership, and self-advocacy will ultimately be more effective in promoting those skills than will teachers providing instruction in what they *presume* to be students' needs. Teachers can still determine how to deliver instruction based on students' self-identified needs and preferences. Ultimately, LEAD has succeeded in helping students develop not only the critical skills of self-advocacy and self-awareness, but also fostering an altruistic philosophy that, when combined with leadership skills, can be effective in changing society's views of individuals with LD.

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AUTHORS' NOTES

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